DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 144 EA 016 239

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TITLE Determining Where to Put Your Instructional Dollars.
PUB DATE Apr 83
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National School Boards Association (San Francisco, CA, April 23-26, 1983).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Board of Education Policy; *Budgeting; Elementary Secondary Education; School Districts; *School District Spending; School Support; State Aid; *State Boards of Education; *State School District Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Utah

ABSTRACT

This report suggests that state boards of education are best able to make budgetary cuts after consulting professional staff, identifying basic educational objectives and goals, and determining which programs contribute most to the largest number of students. A board's decisions are facilitated by such legislation as Utah's Special Purpose Optional Programs (such as career education and extended year), which allow local boards of education to move funds where they wish or to eliminate programs. (PB)

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Determining Where to Put Your Instructional Dollars

Dr. William L. Garner

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Determining Where to Put Your Instructional Dollar

Dr. William L. Garner

In Utah many of the determinations as to where the instructional dollars will be placed have been made by the Legislature, because they have many categorical programs where the funds must be spent for those items, and local boards of education have no choice but to utilize the funds for those particular purposes. Examples of such programs are funds for handicapped youngsters, youth in custody, adult high school completion, vocational and technical education, summer vocational programs such as summer agriculture and summer home economics. However, our Legislature has funded fifteen programs which they call Special Purpose Optional Programs where the local board of education receives appropriations under each of these fifteen categories, but they may move the funds among them any way they wish, and they may completely eliminate some. The fifteen categories in Utah are instructional media centers, extended year, day and summer, compensatory education, elementary school guidance, community education, career education, educational field trips, elementary music, textbook and lab fees, gifted and talented, responsible parenthood, bilingual education, class-size reduction, special needs, and advanced placement. At one time these fifteen programs had the funding from the Legislature, and local boards of education could not move the funds from one program to another. However, two years ago the Legislature reduced the funding by one-third, lumped the programs together, and said, "Local boards of education, you decide where the reduction should be made, and you may move the funds from one program to another." This movement by the Legislature, while welcomed on one hand, created great difficulties because boards of education were required to reduce programs or eliminate programs. The best method, in my opinion, for making such a reduction is to have the professional staff study the problem and present a recommendation to the board of education, knowing that the staff should realize that the board of education has every right to reject the recommendation and adopt another funding format, if they so desire. But at least this provides a buffer to a board of education in that the displeasure by some special interest groups over a proposed reduction can fall on the back of the professional staff and not on the elected representatives. The elected representatives then can see what type of response they have from the community and can adjust that recommendation to fit a situation that they may face. However, it does create a great emotional strain on the board of education when it becomes necessary to reduce programs that may be very dear to their hearts. I thought our board of education did an excellent job in handling this problem. Members looked at certain programs and said, "How strong is the advocacy group?" It also made the professional staff so they had to be very aware of the political ramifications with the board members if certain programs were eliminated, and as we went down through the fifteen programs, we found certain programs that we could eliminate without hurting our basic operation, and we found there were some places we could fund the program by other means. For example, we completely eliminated educational field trips, because in another place in the law the board of education could make a mill levy that would bring in the revenue necessary to still have the field trips. The same applied to textbooks and lab fees, in that there was another place in the school finance formula where funds could be used for textbooks and lab fees. The Legislature also made it possible for school districts to charge students for textbooks and lab fees. Our board of education elected to do that. Another positive step in this direction is that as you have the major portion of the cut fall on one program, you are facing only one advocacy group instead of fifteen, and that helps lead to survival of board members and superintendents. The procedures that we used forced the professional

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staff to look at the entire operation of the school district and ask, "What are the most important and fundamental programs we have -- the ones that contribute to the largest number of youngsters and concentrate on the basic purpose for which we are established?" In other words, we had to look at our objectives and our goals and prioritize them, then it forced us to look at these fifteen programs and say, "Which ones are contributing the most to our highest priority goals?" When that was done, it was recommended, for example, that no money be spent on responsible parenthood, that we were forced to putting a large portion of our money into class size, bilingual education, and special needs where the educational problems of youngsters are addressed directly, and reductions were made in some that were not that basic -- as I say, as responsible parenthood, career education, and some other things. So in reviewing the steps we took to assure that we determined where to put our instructional dollars to force the professional staff to look at the goals of the district and ask, "Which are the most important?" our recommendation to the board of education would be that we put our dollars on programs and activities that contribute the most to achieving these goals and objectives. We made that recommendation to the board of education, and it took a lot of debating, arguing, and feelings, and we had, so to speak, "gored some sacred oxes" -- in other words, whose screaming the loudest depends upon whose ox has been gored. But when all was said and done, the board, after some emotional discussions, finally arrived at a satisfactory solution. That solution modified slightly the recommendation the staff had done, but the initial heat was on staff members and not on the board of education. In these trying times, when finances are so scarce and it is difficult to establish priorities and make everyone happy, as a superintendent I feel like the banker who has to come and tell people that their account is overdrawn. The typical reaction, at least what my friends who are bankers tell me, is that the individuals who overdraw their accounts don't get angry at themselves; they get angry at the banker for telling them they don't have any money left in their accounts. That is the way I feel as Superintendent: When I tell people, "You don't have any money to do all these nice things you want done," they get mad at the superintendent. I am just the banker telling them their account is overdrawn. Somehow American people need to be brought to the realization that they cannot continue to have tax cuts and give us less money and expect us to continue to maintain the program. In Utah, for example, the Legislature has frozen the assessed values at a 1978 level, and they are expecting us to operate a 1983 school district on 1978 taxes. You just can't keep doing that forever; you have to begin making some reductions in your programs. I also believe that they cannot continue to expect the heavy burden of this to fall upon the shoulders of the employees. In Ogden we have the lowest beginning salary on the bachelor's degree level of any district in the State of Utah, and have had for two years. We cannot get that level up because we just don't have the money. The Legislature has controlled it. It has controlled our mill levies. It has tightly controlled our revenues, and there is nothing our local board of education can do. So we must carefully look at where we spend our dollars.

I think you as school board members must resist cutting the quality of your program as much as you possibly can, but when cuts need to be made you need to think of your basic objectives and fundamental goals, and those need to be funded first. You also need to listen to the people who are closest to the problem and say, "These are the reductions that are necessary. Where do you recommend these reductions take place?" But you do not need to necessarily accept those recommendations. As a good example, I have had reductions forced on high schools where we have arrived at the conclusion that a teacher must be eliminated. When we say to the principal, "We must make a reduction. What do you recommend?" the principal invariably will want to recommend the elimination of some small classes that are for gifted youngsters. That cuts into the quality of the program, and on many occasions I have had to say, "We will make the reductions, but I will not let you eliminate these programs, because the quality of education must be

maintained." I think if we don't maintain the quality, in public education we will simply drive more and more youngsters into the private sector of education. Also, it is necessary to work on an attitude through the entire school district that if anyone is aware of waste or needless expenditures, he has an obligation to report that to the next immediate supervisor. I have also attempted to tell people that they can let the superintendent know of places where reductions can be made. Many times people have brought forth ideas that have resulted in significant savings to us simply by reporting things that we had overlooked.

In the final summary, I believe there is one area that employees and the public may come at you to make reductions, and I think you need to resist that, that is, reducing the funds that are available to send school board members to conventions or to workshops. I vigorously defend those funds, because I don't believe one can expect people to be elected to school boards and not receive some training so they can make intelligent decisions. Poor decisions are made by people who are not well schooled in the educational programs and people who do not understand the big picture of education. That can only be gained by school board members' attending workshops and conferences, and those funds need to be defended by superintendents and board members.